

In Front and Behind the Camera

By Jan Uhde

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KINEMA SPEAKS WITH CHINESE DIRECTOR XU JINGLEI

Xu Jinglei (b. 1974) is one of the most versatile young film talents in Mainland China. She first achieved popularity in her home country for her television roles but soon won acclaim for her film appearances, having starred in ten features since 2002. She received the Chinese Film Society Performance Award for her first major film role in Zhang Yang's Spicy Love Soup (1997), the Baihua Best Actress Award in I Love You (Zhang Yuan, 2003) and the Golden Rooster Award for Best Supporting Actress in Far from Home (Yu Zhong, 2002).

More recently, the Beijing-born actress and graduate of the Beijing Film Academy has taken on the role of director. Her first feature Wo he ba ba (My Father and I, 2003) was rewarded at home with a Golden Rooster for Best Directing Debut and invited to a number of international festivals. This success served as a springboard for her second feature, Letter from an Unknown Woman (2004), an imaginative and mature adaptation of Stefan Zweig's 1922 novella of the same name (previously filmed by Max Ophüls in 1948). Xu Jinglei's film won the Silver Seashell Award at the San Sebastian Film Festival in Spain in 2004.

As in My Father and I, the director is also the film's scriptwriter and protagonist, starring next to the internationally known actor-director Wen Jiang (Devils at the Doorstep, Red Sorghum, Black Snow).

Kinema: How did you become interested in Stefan Zweig's story?

Xu Jinglei: I read a lot of Stefan Zweig's stories when I was in college. The second time I read his stories was right before I made the film. At the time, I was working on another script, a war topic, but I had a lot of trouble getting into it. When I read the Letter from an Unknown Woman again, I immediately decided to film it.

What made you want to adapt this particular story?

The two times I read the story I felt very differently about it. The first time I read it was when I was nineteen or twenty. I felt it was a very simple love story about a girl madly in love with a man. The girl seemed pitiful, the man strange. The second time I read it I felt it was the man who was pitiful and the girl not at all. You may sympathise with her but actually she does not need your sympathy. She makes all her own decisions. Even when she has his child, she doesn't tell him about it - these are her own decisions. A person must be very strong-willed to make such decisions, otherwise it wouldn't work. I couldn't do that - I'd tell you I am bearing your child. So when I read the story again, I felt sorry for the man. I felt that this man, after having lived over 40 years, didn't know who he was, didn't realize the kind of life he'd lived. I had completely opposing views, the two times I read the story. This was also because of the changes in me between the ages of nineteen and twenty-nine. My feelings were different then. They reflect what you understand. It's like walking up to a mirror and seeing your own reflection. Different people at a mirror will see themselves in different ways.

How long did you work on the film's script and the film?

The script took two to three months and the filming four and a half months. The actual shooting time was about two and a half months. Another four months for post-production - and then it was done.

Your film was internationally very successful. Was it shown in China, and what was the reaction in China itself?

The film was released in China in February 2005. The reactions were varied. Some thought that both the woman and the man - the Jiang Wen character - should have been better looking; and how could he not remember the woman? Basically these were the two comments.

What is your response to them?

I think whether or not the male lead is attractive is a matter of personal opinion. You may feel he is attractive while I don't. When you love somebody, looks are not the main reason. In life it is like that. For example, I

may really be head over heels in love with someone and feel I cannot live without him. Others may find my behaviour incomprehensible. What's so wonderful about this guy that you should be so passionate about him? You like a particular person but others don't understand why. But when love is shown on the big screen, it's usually portrayed by good-looking stars like Tony Leung Chiu Wai or Takeshi Kaneshiro.

The elliptical style of your film is intriguing. For example, part of the story happens in the war but the war is never shown.

I believe that a movie can't be all-encompassing. You can't talk about too many things. What I wanted to say in this movie was about love. I made a period movie and described the love story. I wanted to portray a simple love affair between two persons, to focus on the emotional relationship between the man and the woman and what happened between them. Everything else is just background. I didn't want to portray a war story. That was not my purpose.



Figure 1: Xu Jinglei and Jiang Wen in *Letter from an Unknown Woman*

Why did you choose the 1930s and 1940s period as the setting?

Actually, earlier on I wanted to have a modern setting, from the late 1970s into the late 90s. When I was one-third through, it became difficult to continue because I discovered the script encroached on issues like unmarried mothers and high-class prostitution. If I were to portray these in this period, it would involve social issues and this I didn't want. I did not want to discuss social issues. I felt they would detract from my original intention and the Chinese censors would intervene. So I decided on the 1930s and 40s. They were turbulent years with frequent political changes.

As for the location, Beijing was unlike Nanjing, which suffered many traumas such as the Nanjing massacre, or Chongqing, which was the hotbed of the Nationalists, and subjected to bombings. On the contrary, Beijing was relatively calm in those turbulent times. Our research and interviews with older people confirmed this. That's why this period and location are very suitable to this story. The film's setting is very similar to the period of the original novel. I chose Beijing over Shanghai because Shanghai was under colonial influence. Visually, the image of Beijing was also very different from Shanghai where many war-time stories are set. So it offers a different perspective, which is refreshing.

How do you feel about directing and acting at the same time?

I feel the script is very important. There aren't many good scriptwriters in China. If you want to look for a good script, it's almost impossible, so you have to depend on your own resources to solve the script problem. In China, scriptwriting doesn't have a high status and therefore doesn't make money. In the past there were many good scriptwriters but they mostly went on to do something else. You have no choice but to write your own script. Actually I got a lot of help in writing the script. In China there aren't any good producers

either. I don't call myself a producer but I had to do everything. I had to do my own financing, the budget, the casting - you can say in China every director is a producer.

My acting experience was actually a very good foundation for me as a director. The first movie I made was self-financed. Also people knew who I was and gave me money. And as a film and television actress, I was already familiar with the filmmaking process. I was lucky to be able to make my first film from the money I earned as an actress and so I could make it the way I wanted, whether or not it would succeed, because I was responsible for it myself.

The disadvantage of acting is that you often have to wait for opportunities, for good stories. So five years ago, I decided to become a director to do it my way. But you are still dependent on others, as you know.

How was the film financed?

I financed my first film myself and then sold it to a Chinese company called Asian Union Film and Media. They liked it and decided to finance my second film.

What is the main difference between the novella and your film?

The original story's intention has always been a mystery. Many people used their own interpretation. The author didn't make clear the meaning of the story. Nobody knew what his purpose was in writing the story. What he wanted to say I don't know. But I know what I wanted to convey. I can only say that the written text is filled with emotion and passion. But it's only a letter at the end of the process. The film, on the other hand, shows the process. In the film I use a less emotional, more controlled style to portray the female character. Someone who really wants to die, like the Hong Kong film star Lesley Cheung, probably wouldn't want to dramatize his intention.⁽¹⁾ The level of intensity is what I felt was the difference between the Letter and the film.



Figure 2: Xu Jinglei and Jiang Wen in *Letter from an Unknown Woman*

Notes

(1) Editorial note: Stefan Zweig committed suicide while in exile in Brazil in 1942.

Xu Jinglei spoke to Yvonne Ng and Jan Uhde during the East Asian Film Festival in Udine, Italy, in April 2005. *Kinema* would like to thank Vivian Qu and Felix Ng for their assistance with the translation of this interview.

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Publications: *Latent Images: Film in Singapore* Second edition, with Yvonne Ng Uhde (Ridge Books, National University Press of Singapore, 2010); *Latent Images: Film in Singapore*, with Yvonne Ng Uhde (Oxford University Press, 2000); *Latent Images: Film in Singapore CD-ROM* (2003, co-author); *Vision and Persistence: Twenty Years of the Ontario Film Institute* (University of Waterloo Press, 1990) and *Ontario Film Institute Programming Activities Index 1969-1989* (Toronto: Ontario Science Centre, 1990). He co-edited the *Place in Space: Human Culture in Landscape* (Proceedings from the Second International Conference of the Working Group "Culture and Landscape" of the International Association of Landscape Ecology, Pudoc Scientific Publishers, Wageningen, Holland, 1993). Jan Uhde has published articles and reviews in several countries (including Canada, USA, Germany, Italy), participated in international juries at film festivals and presented papers at international conferences in North America and Europe. In 1998/99, he was a visiting researcher at the School for Film and Media Studies, Ngee Ann Polytechnic, Singapore.

His professional and research interests focus on Singapore cinema; the identification and distancing mechanisms of the film viewer; the non-authored modifications and manipulation of films; and specific aspects of film history, including the Central European cinema.

He founded KINEMA in 1993.